

The politics of knowledge: ethnicity, capacity and return in post-conflict reconstruction policy

CAROLINE HUGHES*

Abstract. A new casting of diasporas, exiles and returnees as potentially transformative agents in post-conflict polities is the topic of this article. ‘Return of Qualified Expatriates’ programmes have recently been launched by international agencies in a number of post-conflict countries in an attempt to promote better capacity-building within post-conflict states institutions. This article argues that the ostensible technical orientation of these programmes is misleading, and they have a political significance which is noted and contested locally. In political terms, they represent attempts to smuggle Western hierarchies of knowledge into post-conflict reconstruction efforts under the cover of ethnic solidarity, to the detriment of local participation and empowerment. The article argues further that this is always contested by interested parties locally, often by mobilising alternative capacities, labelled ‘authentic’, in opposition. As such, strategies that attempt to use ethnic ties to overcome this local contestation are placing a significant burden on ethnic categories that are slippery, malleable and contested in post-conflict contexts. These points are demonstrated with reference to the cases of Cambodia and Timor-Leste.

Caroline Hughes is Director of the Asia Research Centre and Associate Professor of Governance Studies in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at Murdoch University.

The last fifteen years have seen a shift in the nature of international perspectives on war, and, concomitantly, in beliefs about building states to maintain peace. Since the early 1990s, popular perspectives on intra-state wars have privileged explanations rooted in essentialist ideas about ethnicity¹ and an assumed propensity of ethnic groups to vie violently with one another for access to money and power. In a range of post-war countries, from the Balkans to Rwanda, Iraq and

* I would like to acknowledge the support of the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK, which funded the research upon which this article is based. A version of this article was first presented at the workshop on *Southeast Asian Exiles: Crossing Cultural, Political and Religious Borders*, at the Australian National University. Thanks are due to the participants of that workshop for their helpful comments, and to the reviewers at Review of International Studies.

¹ See discussion in I would like to acknowledge the support of the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK, which funded the research upon which this article is based. A version of this article was first presented at the workshop on *Southeast Asian Exiles: Crossing Cultural, Political and Religious Borders*, at the Australian National University. Thanks are due to the participants of that workshop for their helpful comments, and to the reviewers at Review of International Studies. Christopher Clapham, *Civil War is Not a Stupid Thing* (London: Hurst, 2006), pp. 99–103.

Afghanistan, this ethnicised view of war carried over into an ethnicised view of peace also: a view of peace in which stability is achieved initially by the engineering of institutions to create particular ethnic balances; and in which stability subsequently gives way to 'good governance' via a process of capacity building designed to help those institutions over the longer term to elevate themselves above the ethnic fray. Heavily influenced by the literature on democratic transition and consolidation, peace is regarded as a function of the ability of well-designed institutions to constrain social action.²

Such a conceptualisation of trajectories towards peace thus posits a form of state that is both embedded in ethnic relations, and able to govern them. This form of ethnicised 'embedded autonomy', to borrow Peter Evans' term,³ is frequently framed in the idea of 'capacity-building' as a suitable hybrid of local and Western knowledges. Capacity-building elicits both the internalisation of Western knowledges by non-Western professionals, and at the same time, the exercise of 'local ownership' over these. In this article, I explore this approach initially through a discussion of the status of diasporas in Western thinking about war, peace and development over the last fifteen years, and the shift from regarding exile communities as dangerous hotbeds of long-distance nationalism to valuable sources of both funds and expertise. However, analysis of the progress of returned exiles seeking to build capacities and/or join the political fray in two case studies, Cambodia and Timor-Leste, suggests that the question of local knowledge and problem-solving Western knowhow is open to contestation, and that therefore, where statebuilding is concerned, there is no substitute for old-fashioned politics.

Intra-state war in international policy

As the Cold War wound down and then abruptly ended, aspirations for a world without war took the form of the assertion that war was, in effect, irrational and unnecessary, now that liberal ideology was in the ascendant. Consequently, new institutions, and preferably liberal democratic ones, were required to deal swiftly and fairly with conflict wherever it should arise, and prevent it where it appeared imminent.⁴

² See, for example, Philip Roeder and Donald Rothchild's characterisation of the problem in their, *Sustainable Peace: Power and Democracy after Civil Wars*, 15 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 2; Roeder and Rothchild use concepts of institutional 'transition' and 'consolidation' drawn from the work of democratic transition theorists such as Larry Diamond, Philippe Schmitter and Adam Przeworski. See also the influential scholarly and policy work of Benjamin Reilly on institutional design, especially his *Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³ Peter Evans, *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁴ See, for example, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, 'Democracy: A Newly Recognised Imperative', *Global Governance*, 1 (1995), p. 3; also the revival of the democratic peace thesis, following Michael Doyle, 'Liberalism and World Politics', *American Political Science Review*, 80 (1986), pp. 1151–63; see, for example, Daniele Archibugi, 'Immanuel Kant, Cosmopolitan Law and Peace', *European Journal of International Relations* (1995), pp. 429–56; Bruce Russett, Christopher Layne, David Spiro and Michael Doyle, 'Correspondance: the Democratic Peace Thesis', *International Security*, 19:4 (1995), pp. 164–84; Stanley Hoffman, 'The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism', *Foreign Policy*, 98 (1995), pp. 159–77.

Three sets of events led to the abandonment of this approach by the late 1990s: the dramatic failure of a number of peace processes, most prominently Angola and Rwanda, which attempted to use power-sharing and elections to end warfare; the communal violence accompanying the transition to electoralism in the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia; and the democratic election of Islamist parties in North Africa and the Middle East. Subsequently, greater attention was paid to ethnicity as an explanatory factor in the rise of the 'new wars'. A variety of different approaches to the study of ethnic conflict emerged. At one end of the spectrum were crudely primordialist prophecies of doom, as exemplified by Robert Kaplan's article in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled 'The Coming Anarchy'.⁵ This piece launched the 'New Barbarism' thesis by claiming that social breakdown in parts of Africa was caused by the inability of inferior cultural forms – communalism, animism, and the extended family are specifically mentioned – to cope with environmental crisis and globalisation. The New Barbarism was a logically incoherent but politically influential dogma, which, according to Stephen Ellis, was distributed as important reading matter by the US State Department to US embassies around the world.⁶

More interestingly, the importance of globalisation in determining the nature of the New Wars was advanced by Mary Kaldor; Kaldor drew the connection in her book between proliferating transnational connections and the rise of ethnicity as a factor in conflict.⁷ The decline of superpower funding for wars in underdeveloped countries in the South prompted greater analytical interest in the involvement of diaspora communities in funding and mobilising support for internal conflict in various countries around the world. The significance of the Croatian community in various European countries during the Balkan Wars and the mobilisation of the Tamil community in Britain to support the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's separatist struggle in the north of Sri Lanka have been extensively studied in this literature.⁸ This kind of diaspora financing for war was not a new phenomenon: the Irish Republican Army's struggle for Irish reunification had long been supported financially by Irish communities in the US, while the influence of the Jewish and Palestinian diasporas on politics in the Middle East was also profound. However, once superpower rivalries and funding receded in importance over the course of the 1990s, this ethnic dimension to conflict stood out more clearly, and was regarded as growing in importance as a result of technical advances in media and telecommunications.

⁵ Robert Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy: How Scarcity, Crime, Overpopulation, Tribalism and Disease are Rapidly Destroying the Social Fabric of Our Planet', *The Atlantic Monthly* (February 1994), available at: {<http://www.theatlantic.com/>} accessed on 17 September 2007.

⁶ Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy, The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War* (London: Hurst, 1999), pp. 19–20.

⁷ Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars, Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁸ See Benedict Anderson, 'Long-Distance Nationalism', *New Left Review*; Khachig Tololyan, 'Rethinking Diasporas: Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment', *Diaspora: a Journal of Transnational Studies*, 5:1 (1996), pp. 3–36; Zlatko Skrbis, *Long Distance Nationalism: Diasporas, Homelands and Identities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, *Greed and Grievance in Civil War* (Washington: World Bank, 2000); Yossi Shain, 'The Role of Diasporas in Conflict Perpetuation or Resolution', *SAIS Review*, 22:2 (2002), p. 116; Nadge Al-Ali and Khalid Khoser (eds), *New Approaches to Migration: Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home* (London: Routledge, 2002).

Diasporas, consequently, were implicated in this apparent post-Cold War upsurge of violence-from-below, as were refugees, now viewed unsympathetically, particularly following the moral dilemmas posed by Hutu refugee camps in Zaire, as a threat to the health, security, and prosperity of the Western world.

The analytical purchase of Kaldor's 'new wars' model was soon subsumed under rhetorical concerns regarding the dysfunctionality of whole nations or ethnic groups engaged in intra-state war. Furthermore, links between 'there' and 'here' in a globalising world prompted the emergence of concerns about 'failed states' – states that failed due their own incompetence to retain legitimacy and police their populations, and which therefore not only fell into civil strife at home, but caused security problems for their neighbours and internationally.⁹

In the emerging policy debate about what to do about states in conflict, a growing preference became evident among international organisations for long term engagements aimed, not merely at achieving a ceasefire, but at 'building peace' and reconstructing economies, through the promotion of particular types of governance that could better manage unruly societies. A key World Bank report published in 1998 gave an account of intra-state war as characterised by 'cultures of armed warfare and violence'¹⁰ which feed on, and exacerbate 'ethnic or religious competition', encouraging a view of conflict as increasingly an endemic condition. A cycle of violence emerges which is embedded in a local context, and which increases in its complexity with every round, entailing that 'there is no pattern or single causal agent in any given case, and outside actors have only a limited ability to influence the course of events in specific countries.'¹¹

Paul Collier's research for the Bank on the causes and consequences of intra-state war subsequently refined this thesis. Collier argued that economics was the most important factor in sparking conflict, linking 'the disastrous deviation of African economic performance from that of other developing countries' to the level of conflict in the continent. He and his team identified the statistical significance of the presence of lootable natural resources in starting wars, leading to the 'greed thesis'. This specifically rejected the idea of wars and insurgencies emerging from grievance over injustice or oppression. Collier attributed war primarily to the 'lure of imagined wealth' for political leaders and the ignorance and easy manipulability of their followers. At the same time, Collier's team also noted that certain types of ethnic mix were particularly conflict-prone, asserting that the presence of one ethnic group comprising between 45 per cent and 80 per cent of the population doubled the risk of conflict. Further, they noted that countries which acquired an exile diaspora in North America during the course of a conflict were six times more likely to fall back into conflict after efforts to make peace.¹² In Collier's work in line with wider thinking about the causes and consequences of conflict in the mid to late 1990s, diasporas and refugees are viewed as dangerous

⁹ See Gerald Helman and Stephen Ratner, 'Saving Failed States', *Foreign Policy*, 89 (1992/1993), pp. 3–20; and the reassessment following 11 September 2001 as in Robert Rotberg, 'Failed States in a World of Terror', *Foreign Affairs*, 81:4 (2002), pp. 127–40.

¹⁰ World Bank, *Post-Conflict Reconstruction, the Role of the World Bank* (Washington DC: World Bank, 1998), p. 2.

¹¹ World Bank, *Post-Conflict Reconstruction*, p. 17.

¹² Betty Bigombe, Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis, 'Policies for Building Post-Conflict Peace', *Journal of African Economies*, 9:3 (2000), pp. 323–48.

entities, mindlessly following ruthless 'ethnic entrepreneurs' whose ostensible aim is to reclaim lost territories for the homeland, but who are secretly stashing away billions of dollars worth of lootable natural resources in the bank.¹³

By the 21st century, however, this ordering had shifted again. The War on Terror demanded a return to a system-wide war footing. To an extent, the UN was marginalised, and the US emerged as the sole superpower to the fore in international politics, under the scanty fig leaf of the unappealing Coalition of the Willing. The military objective in the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq was the imposition of friendly regimes over unruly populations in strategic areas; as such, *diasporas were recast again, not as the irredeemably nostalgic sponsors of ethnic war, but as sharply divided between, on the one hand, threats to homeland security, to be dealt by swift and terrible means; but, on the other, as potentially reliable allies in an ethnicised peace.*¹⁴

This coincided with a new analysis of the significance of migrants for international policy in the merging fields of security and development. New approaches to measuring remittance flows revealed these to be far more extensive than development professionals had realised, leading to a rapid reassessment of policy priorities and the rise of a new 'development mantra'.¹⁵ Similarly, greater attention to the increasing tendency to circular migration between countries like India and the US prompted interest in the phenomenon of 'brain gain' – the return of highly skilled professionals with significant international experience to raise the technical level of industries back home.¹⁶ New excitement and considerable policy activity on the part of international organisations over this ethnicised version of international development led to a reassessment of how refugee or exile communities might engage with their homelands. The World Bank produced a study in 2006 entitled *Diaspora Networks and the International Migration of Skills: How Countries Can Draw on Their Talent Abroad*.¹⁷ Equally, a new role for diasporas as enlightened contributors to post-conflict reconstruction, rather than as atavistic sponsors of conflict, was envisaged in the context of countries emerging from the wars of the 1990s. A project has been initiated to research this at the University

¹³ The model for this is former Liberian president Charles Taylor, who supported rebels in Sierra Leone and fomented ethnic conflict in Liberia in the name of Greater Liberia, in the course of which he managed to enrich himself by several billion dollars through led an invasion of Sierra Leone in the name of Greater Liberia, in the course of which he managed to enrich himself by several billion dollars through trading arms for diamonds.

¹⁴ See Simon Chesterman's account of the change in UN attitudes towards ethnic division between its deployment to Kosovo in 1999 and its deployment to Afghanistan in 2002. Chesterman, *You the People: the UN, Transitional Administration and State-Building* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Devesh Kapur, 'Remittances: The New Development Mantra?', Paper presented at the G-24 Technical Group Meeting, Harvard University and Center for Global Development (2003).

¹⁶ See Jean-Baptiste Meyer, Jorge Charum, Dora Bernal, Jacques Gaillard, José Granés, John Leon, Alvaro Montenegro, Alvaro Morales, Carlos Murcia, Nora Narvaez-Berthelemot Luz Stella Parrado, Bernard Schlemmer, 'Turning Brain Drain into Brain Gain: The Colombia Experience of the Diaspora Option', *Science, Technology and Society*, 2:2 (1997), pp. 285–315; Uwe Hunger, 'Indian IT Entrepreneurs in the US and in India: An Illustration of the "Brain Gain Hypothesis"', *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 6:2 (2004), pp. 99–109; Anna Lee Saxenian, 'From Brain Drain to Brain Circulation: Transnational Communities and Regional Upgrading in India and China', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 40:2 (2005), pp. 35–61.

¹⁷ Yevgeny Kuznetsov, *Diaspora Networks and the International Migration of Skills: How Countries Can Draw on Their Talent Abroad* (Washington DC: World Bank Institute: 2006).

of Bradford's Department of Peace Studies,¹⁸ a publication produced by the UN University in 2007 sought to address the question of 'how to channel the positive contributions of diasporas so as to support conflict resolution'.¹⁹ This was a shift which coordinated fortunately with a newly acquired interest on the part of the US in placing US-grown client regimes in power in various countries it had recently invaded as part of the War on Terror.

One of the contributors to the UNU study categorised potential contributions of returnees from developed countries into political, economic and socio-cultural spheres. Alongside the economic impact of aid and remittances, potential political contributions identified included strengthening civil society and promoting democracy. Jacob Bercovitch, in his contribution to the volume, wrote that 'Diasporas can make an important contribution to the development of a healthy and vibrant civil society in the wake of a conflict.' He continued, 'Diasporas in democratic countries can inform members of their group in the homeland of the norms, values and institutions which define a democratic polity and which provide equal rights to all.'²⁰ Similarly, in the sphere of socio-cultural influence, he suggested that diasporas should have a role to play in promoting justice and reconciliation. He noted:

Reconciliation is the means to heal people and rebuild webs of relationships, which have been broken down by years of hatred and violence. When it comes to reconciliation, people in the homeland are more accepting and willing to listen to advice from members of the diaspora rather than other foreigners. Members of the diaspora can offer expertise, knowledge and understanding of cultural norms and a deeper appreciation of the situation in their homeland.²¹

In response to this new policy agenda, the International Organisation for Migration began to run 'Return of Qualified Nationals' programmes in countries like Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as across Africa. The Afghan programme was designed to 'fill short-term capacity gaps' in Afghan ministries by placing highly qualified and highly paid expatriate Afghans from developed countries into key advisory positions, with a mandate to train colleagues.²²

This new casting of diasporas, exiles and returnees as potentially transformative agents in post-conflict polities is the object of scrutiny in this article. On the one hand, this rhetoric closely resembles the kinds of things that returnees from developed countries say about themselves when they return to their war-torn homeland. And it is certainly the case that many exiles are eager to return to their country of origin and help, if they can. On the other, the evidence supporting their ability to effect these kinds of changes is slender. Three problems present themselves. *First*, the extent to which any individual can be transformative in such a context is questionable. Ideas about capacity development which assume that

¹⁸ The Project is one of three key topics addressed by the Transformation of War Economies Project; for details see: {<http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/twe/research/#diasporas>} accessed on 26 August 2009.

¹⁹ Hazel Smith and Paul Stares, 'Preface', in Smith and Stares (eds), *Diasporas in Conflict: Peace-Makers or Peace-Wreckers?* (Tokyo: UN University Press, 2007), p. viii.

²⁰ Jacob Bercovitch, 'Diasporas and Conflict Resolution', in Hazel Smith and Paul Stares (eds), *Diasporas in Conflict: Peacemakers or Peace-wreckers?* (Tokyo: UN University Press, 2007), p. 34.

²¹ Bercovitch, 'Diasporas and Conflict Resolution', p. 35.

²² Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission, Capacity Development Secretariat, 'Afghan Expatriate Program', webpage, available at: {http://www.afghanexperts.gov.af/index.php?page_id=17} accessed on 20 August 2009.

better public services require only a transfer of technical knowledge from one individual to another have been widely critiqued recently by political economists arguing for a theory of institutional change that is rooted in the transformation of societal forces as a causal factor, rather than in a mere technical process of upgrading.²³

An evaluation of a 2007 EU funded Return of Qualified Afghans programme Afghanistan offers a good example of the kinds of problems inherent in the latter conception of returnees. The evaluation stated that the objective of the programme was 'to enhance the capacities for policy and institutional reform through the placement of approximately 22 Afghan expatriates with significant reconstruction and development experience to enhance the government's effectiveness in overseeing urgent policy and institutional reforms.'²⁴ Describing the challenges facing the expatriate experts, the evaluation report noted 'lack of facilities and proper working environment'; bureaucratic centralisation and consequent resistance to change on the part of the government; 'discrimination' against the experts because of the disparity between their salaries and those of ordinary civil servants; and 'low capacity of the team the experts are working with'.²⁵ From a merely technical perspective, it could be objected that these kinds of problems are precisely the point and that is why capacity building is needed. But it is more significant, perhaps, to note that the make-up of the local team, its access to facilities and resources, the sentiments emerging over disparities in pay, and the attitude of the government to change are not merely technical problems to be overcome by capacity building, but the result of political decisions, about staffing, funding and reform. Capacity builders are not merely imparting knowledge, but intervening politically.

Second, the new enthusiasm on the part of international aid agencies for the prospects of getting returnees from previously exiled communities to deliver aid in an 'ethnically appropriate' way is based upon dubious premises regarding ethnic solidarity. Commonalities of language – certainly one aspect of ethnicity – may certainly offer advantages to individuals working in the field of public administration reform, although this does not appear to have been much of an issue in the context of Afghanistan: the Afghan Government's Resource Guide for prospective returnees gives the following curiously nonchalant guidance on the language question:

Within the Afghan government itself, English is a highly sought after language skill. However, at times, proficient spoken and even written, Dari & Pashto are also necessary.²⁶

²³ See Richard Robison, 'Strange Bedfellows: Political Alliances in the Making of Neo-Liberal Governance', in Robison and Wil Hout (eds), *Governance and the Depoliticisation of Development*, (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 15–28.

²⁴ Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission Capacity Development Secretariat, Program Support Unit Monitoring and Evaluation Section, 'Placement of Afghan Expatriate Professionals from EU Countries: Experts' Performance Evaluation Report' (Kabul: IARCSC, 2008), p. 3.

²⁵ 'Evaluation Report', p. 6.

²⁶ Embassy of Afghanistan, *Return of Qualified Expatriates Resource Guide* (Washington: Embassy of Afghanistan, 2006), p. 17, available at: {<http://www.embassyofafghanistan.org/documents/ExpatPacket11-2-06.pdf>} accessed on 23 February 2009.

But, as Denise Natali comments in her discussion of Kurdish diaspora interventions in the Iraq war,²⁷ and as I will show in the discussion below of returnees in two other post-conflict countries, Cambodia and East Timor, commonalities of 'ethnicity', 'culture' and 'identity' cannot be assumed, due to the different transformations forged both between and among homeland and diaspora populations as a result of different experiences of war and exile. Where it is politically expedient to challenge assertions of ethnic identity, it is actually very easy to challenge them.

Third, in the context of the Afghan Expatriate Return scheme, the distance between expatriate returnees and locals was not only evident from past experiences, but was specifically codified in the terms of the scheme itself. Thus, the Afghan government's resource guide states that, for the more senior positions in the Afghan scheme, 'depending on educational level and work experience, one may be recruited as either an "international" or "local" staff which would, of course, impact salaries.'²⁸ A UNDP report on the scheme noted that, perhaps predictably, where 'international' salaries were awarded, 'the provision of Afghan expertise to line ministries at daily fee rates that represent multiples of monthly salaries of civil servants has raised sensitive questions and is partially responsible for the delays and political resistance in [...] implementation.'²⁹

The payment of international salaries represents an evident, material discrimination which loads a great deal of pressure onto presumed ethnic bonds. Furthermore, the technical solutions and professional expertise that returned qualified expatriates are envisaged to bring to their country of origin create a new metric for discriminating between the relative worth of different contributors to national reconstruction: those who possess Western 'solutions' and those who possess only Afghan 'problems'. This is not to say that expertise is no use in a post-conflict setting: but *it is to recognise the political significance of introducing Western forms of knowledge as key resources, since doing so creates new hierarchies of contribution and exclusion from the business of reconstructing the country.*

The expectation that some kind of ethnic camaraderie can somehow counteract this politics, and render it a harmless internal affair, loads a great deal of pressure onto presumed ethnic bonds. This is not only the case in the highly politicised area of public administration reform, but also in the wider, and equally politicised fields of democracy promotion, civil society activism and reconciliation. The assumption that returnees will be recognised as 'sisters and brothers', as Bercovitch describes them, whose advice is valued and acted upon, is arguably far-fetched, and based upon an idealistic conception of what ethnicity might be made to achieve. In my analysis of two cases, Cambodia and Timor-Leste, below, I suggest that in the politics of status, hierarchy and knowledge surrounding the role of returnees from the diaspora, *there is far too much at stake in terms of distributions of power in the post-conflict era for feelings of ethnic solidarity to simply override political struggle*

²⁷ Denise Natali, 'Kurdish Interventions in the Iraq War', in Smith and Stares (eds), *Diasporas in Conflict*, p. 198.

²⁸ Embassy of Afghanistan, *Return of Qualified Expatriates Resource Guide*, p. 16.

²⁹ Stephen Massing and Abdul Bari, 'Capacity Development During Political Transitions: the Case of Afghanistan', paper presented at the Seminar on Capacity Development, Bratislava (21–23 November 2005).

over these issues. Indeed, ethnicity itself can be transformed along new and exclusionary lines in the interest of supporting local claims to knowledge and power.

The ethnic politics of capacity building

Attempts to recruit ethnic kin as capacity builders can be regarded as reflecting, not merely the language difficulties that beguile post-conflict aid operations, but as an attempt to mask the highly ideological nature of capacity-building discourses themselves, in a context of aid-dependent development. The term 'capacity-building' as it is used today comes from two different conceptions that appear in the literature on post-conflict reconstruction – that associated with participatory approaches to community development and that associated with second-generation state reforms – the so-called 'post-conditionality' era of donor-state relations. In the former, associated with Deborah Eade's formulation from 1997, the 'capacities' to be built are contextual, and focused on overcoming external constraints. She writes:

A capacity-building approach to development involves identifying the constraints that women and men experience in realizing their basic rights, and finding appropriate vehicles through which to strengthen their ability to overcome their causes of exclusion and suffering.³⁰

In this formulation, external agents operate to try to develop and systematise already existing capacities within communities, as a means to put 'development' on a sustainable local footing.

In the context of state-building, by contrast, 'capacity'-building has been focused on the reform of institutions to better conform to the rational-legal and, specifically, neoliberal ideal, as explicated by the new institutionalist economics and reiterated by Francis Fukuyama in his recent book on the subject. Fukuyama defines 'capacity' in this context as 'the ability of states to plan and execute policies and to enforce laws cleanly and transparently'³¹ – a formulation that closely conforms to World Bank definitions of good governance. Indeed, Fukuyama cites the World Bank's 1997 report on the state, and its catalogue of state functions ranging from 'minimal' to 'activist'. As Shahar Hameiri has noted, in this approach, capacity building serves the purpose of not merely rebuilding the state, but of significantly reorienting it towards international agendas and is thus 'in reality a political project' one 'with identifiable political and ideological underpinnings that attempts to establish a certain relationship between rulers and ruled.' Furthermore, he argues, this project can only be understood 'against the backdrop of the development of technocratic modes of governance within a neoliberalising Western state.'³² The distinction between Eade's and Fukuyama's approach to capacity in these two contexts is significant. In the former case, the nature of the

³⁰ Deborah Eade, *Capacity-Building: an Approach to People-Centred Development* (Oxford: Oxfam, 1997), p. 24.

³¹ Francis Fukuyama, *State Building, Governance and World Order in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Profile Books, 2004), p. 9.

³² Shahar Hameiri, 'Capacity and Its Fallacies: International State Building as State Transformation', *Millennium*, 38:1 (2009), p. 57.

'capacities' in question are local knowledges to be discovered and supported by external actors. In the latter, the 'capacities' are Western ideologies, to be imparted and determined by outsiders as a means to achieve political outcomes.

A further issue in defining capacity building is the extent to which the term is associated with 'empowerment'. As Van Der Borgh points out, while 'most' external donors claim to strengthen local capacities in some way, 'some focus exclusively on the strengthening of local capacities as an end in itself; others treat it as a means to build civil society and to deepen the democratic process.'³³ Both capacity building through reform of the state and capacity building through the 'empowerment' of civil society address the idea of good governance, from the supply- and demand-sides.

A growing body of literature has criticised the use of 'empowerment' in this context as a form of newspeak. Oliver Richmond comments that, in post-conflict states undergoing international intervention, 'Guidance in, or control of, almost every aspect of state and society is provided by external actors, which construct liberal regimes through a mixture of consensual and punitive strategies.'³⁴ As such, the liberal peace is transformed from a liberating ideal to a top-down, exclusionary and hegemonic affair, with respect to both state and civil society. John Pender comments, with reference to Tanzania: 'Despite the appearance of two distinct, complementary and countervailing spheres of Tanzanian politics – civil society and pro-reform state elite – these two spheres are both separate wings of international influence in Tanzania, playing out a peculiar shadow theatre for the benefit of donors.'³⁵ The empowerment offered by this kind of intervention is merely a cipher.

The ambition of liberal peacebuilders, with their desire to achieve such 'empowerment' not merely at the level of the conflict-ridden state, but at the level of the individual within the war-torn society, arguably creates the need for capacity-building on a lavish scale in post-conflict states. *Capacity building thus comes to represent the means by which individuals are brought to a consciousness of the appropriate, internationally mandated and administered, routes to peace.* It represents the training of individuals as a means to reconstruct their relationships with one another, and with international agencies themselves – as a means to empowerment through the disciplining of political contention into 'standards of "proper" behaviour'.³⁶

But in fact, in my exploration of this below in the context of East Timor and Cambodia, I challenge Pender's claim that the new conditionality reduces politics

³³ Chris Van Der Borgh, 'Donors in War-Torn Societies: El Salvador', in Gerd Junne and Willemijn Verkoren (eds), *Post-Conflict Development, Meeting New Challenges* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2005), p. 249.

³⁴ Oliver Richmond, *The Transformation of Peace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), p. 104. Richmond's work on post-conflict peacebuilding has echoes in the growing 'governmentality' literature on governance reforms in the context of development; see, for example, Jeremy Gould, 'Poverty, Politics and States of Partnership', in Gould (ed.), *The New Conditionality: the Politics of Poverty Reduction Strategies*, (London: Zed, 2005), pp. 1–16; and Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development and the Practice of Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

³⁵ John Pender, 'Country Ownership: the Evasion of Donor Responsibility', in Christopher Bickerton et al., (eds), *Politics Without Sovereignty, a Critique of Contemporary International Relations* (London: University College London Press, 2007), p. 123.

³⁶ Jeremy Gould and Julia Ojanen, 'Tanzania: Merging in the Circle', in Gould (ed.), *The New Conditionality, the Politics of Poverty Reduction Strategies* (London: Zed, 2005), p. 45.

to a 'shadow theatre' played out for the benefit of donors. I argue that the issue of 'capacity' has been translated into local political discourse with real effects on the ground, although not necessarily those envisaged by capacity builders themselves. *This not only affects who gets what why and how in post-conflict states, but also affects the conception of the political community and the status of the state that represents and governs it.*

These real effects have been almost uniformly underestimated and/or misread by international actors, who are regularly unduly swayed in their assessments of post-conflict contexts by the *terra nullius* discourses that inform state-building efforts in post-conflict societies. This is a powerful idea that has underwritten and legitimised many statebuilding efforts. It takes slightly different forms in different places – in East Timor, the claim that the departure of the Indonesians had left Timor entirely bereft of experienced personnel informed much decision-making by the UN Transitional Authority; while in Cambodia, reiteration of the extermination of the educated class under the Pol Pot regime of the 1970s permitted similar assumptions, despite the fact that a state had been rebuilt during the 1980s by administrators and technicians trained in Vietnam and the Soviet Bloc. In the case of Cambodia, this was combined with the idea that the entire nation had been 'traumatized' and 'brutalized' by war, an idea that contributed to the delegitimation of local efforts and the legitimation of international ones.³⁷

On the back of these assumptions international intervenors are able to articulate grand visions, free of the constraints of local politics. In Cambodia, the SRSB wrote that the task of UNTAC was 'to build a new country',³⁸ while a different SRSB in East Timor enthused, 'we are faced with the almost unprecedented opportunity to get a country right from the beginning'.³⁹ It is significant that there is a substantial literature now criticising UNTAET's highly centralised mode of operation and its reluctance to cede greater participation to East Timorese; there is also a rather smaller literature which criticises the failure of UNTAC to recognise the realities of the existing state in Cambodia in the early 1990s.⁴⁰ However, much of this literature places the blame on short-sighted actors or tendencies embedded in the structures of international institutions. Such

³⁷ See Caroline Hughes and Vanessa Pupavac, 'The Pathologization of Post-Conflict Societies: Cambodia and Kosovo Compared', *Third World Quarterly*, 26:6 (2005), pp. 873–89.

³⁸ Akashi, Yasushi, 'To Build a New Country, the Task of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia', *Harvard International Review* (1992/1993), pp. 34–5, 68–9.

³⁹ Sergio Vieira de Mello, Statement. Lisbon Donors' Meeting on East Timor (22–23 June 2000), available at: {<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTTIMORLESTE/Resources/Opening+Sergio.pdf>} accessed on 22 May 2008.

⁴⁰ The situation in the two countries is compared in Caroline Hughes, *Dependent Communities: Aid and Politics in Cambodia and East Timor* (Ithaca: Cornell SEAP, 2009); on East Timor, see Astrid Surkhe, 'Peacekeepers as Nation-Builders, Dilemmas of the UN in East Timor', *International Peacekeeping*, 8:4 (2001), pp. 1–20; Jarat Chopra, 'The UN's Kingdom of East Timor', *Survival*, 42:3 (2000), pp. 27–39 and 'Building State Failure in East Timor', *Development and Change*, 33:5 (2002), pp. 979–1000; Simon Chesterman, 'Peacekeeping in Transition: Self-Determination, Statebuilding and the UN', *International Peacekeeping*, 9:1 (2002), pp. 45–76. On Cambodia see Caroline Hughes, *The Political Economy of Cambodia's Transition, 1991–2001* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Andrew Robert Cock, 'The Interaction between a Ruling Elite and an Externally Promoted Policy Reform Agenda: The Case of Forestry under the Second Kingdom of Cambodia 1993–2003', PhD Dissertation, La Trobe University (2007); Oliver Richmond and Jason Franks, 'Liberal Hubris? Virtual Peace in Cambodia', *Security Dialogue*, 38:1 (2007), pp. 27–48; Beatrice Pouligny, *Peace Operations Seen from Below: UN Peacekeepers and Local People* (London: Hurst and Co, 2006).

exclusions are necessary to the *terra nullius* claims that award legitimacy to intervention in the first place, and they also have the function of permitting a form of 'capacity building' which dispenses with the imperative, articulated in the progressive, community-development oriented conception of the term as developed by Eade, of analysing people's existing capacities in order to help them to use these to author their own development. In a *terra nullius*, there are no 'capacities' – just traumatised survivors whose lack of capacity can be used to explain their failure to respond as desired by international intervenors. Telling in this regard is the response of an international UNTAET official, quoted in *The Australian* newspaper, to a strike by local Timorese UNTAET employees. The employees were striking over pay and conditions; the international official commented that their dissatisfaction was due to their lack of capacity to perform their allotted roles:

The Timorese have no familiarity with any of these roles. All that experience left with the Indonesians. We, the donors and the international agencies, are having to train them virtually from zero.⁴¹

Arguably, this 'lack of capacity' diagnosis is significant in that it frees international intervenors from the need to regard local reactions as any kind of a check on their policies. *Yet doing so also blinds intervenors from recognising the ways in which capacity-building passes into local political discourse with real effects on distributions of power.*

The cases of Cambodia and Timor-Leste exemplify the impact of ideas about capacities on the organisation of politics in post-conflict countries. In both cases, international intervenors entering the countries after long years of isolation and destructive warfare found local populations whom they saw as 'lacking capacity'. In each case, also, post-conflict reconstruction was conducted with a significant degree of participation from returnees from abroad – indeed, founding elections in both Cambodia and Timor-Leste brought returnees to power, in the shape of Prince Norodom Ranariddh of the *Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Independent, Neutre, Pacifique et Cooperatif* (Funcinpec); and Mari Alkatiri of the *Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente* (Fretilin). In Cambodia, furthermore, international support for 'civil society development' in the early 1990s led to the emergence of a significant NGO sector, which initially was dominated by returnees. In both Cambodia and Timor-Leste, these returnees relied heavily upon a political rhetoric in which they equated their own cosmopolitanism with an ability to both deliver international assistance and control it in the interests of the nation. Yet in both cases, this rhetoric was successfully challenged with a counter-rhetoric of 'authenticity', in which putatively 'local' knowledges of various kinds were vigorously defended. And in both cases, links with international backers proved less significant at home than the ability to link with and mobilise networks of real political supporters on the ground.

⁴¹ Peter Alford, 'Peacing East Timor Back Together: Rebuilding East Timor is Proving a Thankless Task', *The Australian* (27 June 2000), reproduced online at: {www.etan.org/et2000b/june/25-30/27theaus.htm}.

Capacity and the politics of knowledge in Cambodia and Timor-Leste

In East Timor, the Acting Principal Legal Adviser to UNTAET from October 1999 to February 2000, Hansjoerg Strohmeyer, wrote that 'it quickly became apparent to UNTAET officials that a system of justice in East Timor, including the necessary regulatory framework, first had to be *built* – and built within the shortest possible time – before it could be *administered* in accordance with Security Council Resolution 1272 (1999). Never before has the UN been required to construct, literally from the ground up, a fully functioning court system, vested with full criminal and civil jurisdiction [...]'.⁴² Strohmeyer goes on to describe the physical destruction of the courtrooms and the lack of experience of the available appointments to judicial and prosecutorial positions.

While this picture is accurate, it should also be noted that the Indonesians left behind almost 100 young people with law degrees – a reasonable number to work with in a country with less than a million inhabitants – and a body of Indonesian law. When UNTAET discovered this, it took what Strohmeyer describes as the 'bold but, in light of the circumstances, appropriate step' of appointing them to staff the judicial system, while at the same time insisting that the lack of experience of the appointees necessitated ongoing training and mentoring efforts by international agencies.⁴³

In the years that followed, this 'bold step' was reversed, as the 'lack of capacity' of the Indonesian-trained lawyers and judges was used by the Timorese government to delegitimise the role of the judiciary after independence. This led to public disputes conducted via the media between the Indonesian-trained lawyers, now formed into a Bar Association, and government ministers, including the Prime Minister himself. The executive began to publicly ignore decisions of the courts on the grounds that the judges 'lacked capacity' and had made the wrong decision; in response, lawyers held public demonstrations in defence of judicial independence. Subsequently, in early 2005, the government, via the president of the Court of Appeal, Claudio Ximenes, imposed a written examination on all judges and prosecutors to test their 'capacity'. Every one failed, prompting the government to suspend them from official duties, pending their successful completion of a two and a half year training programme.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these events caused significant discontent among the legal and judicial profession. Conflict between lawyers and judges on the one hand, and the executive and its man in the judicial sector, Claudio Ximenes, quickly became linked, by those involved, to questions of status derived from the experience of resistance to Indonesian rule. The lawyers, all of whom had graduated from Indonesian universities during the period of occupation, represented a young generation of Timorese, many of whom had been active, as students, in the clandestine movement, taking considerable risks to organise public protests and demonstrations against Indonesian rule. The clandestine movement had been created in the early 1980s, initially as a means of mobilising support for the increasingly beleaguered FALINTIL guerrillas hiding in the mountains of

⁴² Hansjoerg Strohmeyer, 'Building a New Judiciary for East Timor: Challenges of a Fledgeling Nation', *Criminal Law Forum*, 11 (2000), p. 262.

⁴³ Strohmeyer, 'Building a New Judiciary', p. 262.

Timor; however, as the Indonesians began to open up Timor towards the end of the 1980s to international visitors and, occasionally, the international media, the clandestine movement gained international prominence, particularly after the Santa Cruz massacre of 1991, in which the killing of hundreds of protestors in a cemetery in Dili was captured on film, smuggled out of Timor, and shown in news bulletins world wide. The Santa Cruz massacre represented a turning point for the Timorese resistance, coinciding, as it did, almost exactly with the fall of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of calls for the international community to achieve a moral compass by which to steer. Throughout the 1990s, the clandestine movement in Timor continued to remind the outside world of Timor's suffering, at great risk to the students and other urban dwellers involved.

By contrast, the executive, and particularly individuals such as the Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri, Minister of Justice, Ana Pessoa, and president of the Supreme Court Claudio Ximenes, was dominated by veterans of the diplomatic offensive – founding members of FRETILIN who had spent the period of occupation outside Timor, in Portugal or in other Portuguese speaking countries, pursuing the largely thankless task of attempting to promote diplomatic interest in Timor's plight. This group returned to lead FRETILIN in the post-conflict period, taking command of the political party just as international agencies were seeking to 'maximise the use of East Timorese human resources' and at the same time promote multi-party democracy. Mari Alkatiri and Ana Pessoa, both of whom spent the war in Mozambique, along with Ramos-Horta and Joao Carrascalao, both returned from Australia, received four of five cabinet posts awarded to Timorese by UNTAET in July 2000. Only one post went to someone – Father Filomeno Jacob of the Catholic Church – who had spent the war inside Timor.

From his position as holder of the Economic Affairs portfolio in UNTAET's first Timorese cabinet, Alkatiri was able to secure the Fretilin nomination to the prime ministerial candidacy in the 2001 elections. As Prime Minister, he appointed Ana Pessoa as Justice Minister, and another returnee, Claudio Ximenes, who held Portuguese citizenship, as President of the Supreme Court. Other returnees appointed to key positions in the post-independence government included defence minister Roque Rodriguez, interior minister Rogerio Lobato, and finance minister Madalena Boavida. These individuals were part of the so-called 'Maputo Mafia' having spent the war in Mozambique. Ramos-Horta, who had returned from Australia, retained the Foreign Ministry portfolio, although he did not join Fretilin; Jose Texeira, also returned from Australia, did join Fretilin and was awarded the natural resources portfolio.

As these individuals were soon to discover, returnees from exile, particularly those who have been educated in the West, or who have been successful in business or professional life there, frequently find themselves in an ambiguous position in post-conflict politics. They are regarded by international agencies as ideal interlocutors in reconstruction activities; they speak both Western and local languages, and understand both Western and local approaches to getting things done. As such they seem to bridge the divide between the legitimacy of the local and the capacity of the international. However, from a local perspective, this is often viewed differently – legitimacy does not arise from mere ethnic affiliation, but in post-conflict contexts – certainly in Cambodia and East Timor – arises from one's role in the historic struggle. Those who have spent the war years in comfort

and safety on the outside can easily be attacked for their failure to understand the nature of local sacrifices.

The origins of these post-independence leaders in exile was a point of debate under UNTAET. Following the swearing in of his cabinet in 2000, Special Representative Sergio Vieira de Mello was asked by an interviewer on Radio UNTAET whether Ana Pessoa's appointment to the legal affairs portfolio was appropriate, given that she had lived in Mozambique for 20 years and was still there at the time. De Mello replied: 'The fact that she has lived abroad does not mean she is incompetent to exercise functions inside East Timor in our Cabinet. She is a highly respected professional lawyer.'

De Mello went on:

The broader question is: are we not giving a preferential treatment to the diaspora; to the Portuguese-speaking East Timorese? The answer is no. The answer is there should be no such distinction; there should be no such hierarchy of merit. I have told the new generation, those who have remained in East Timor that their own merits will be recognized; they will be represented in positions of deputy cabinet members, that one would expect of the younger generation, as well as in other positions of the executive and definitely in the National Council.⁴⁴

However, De Mello's own justification for the appointment of Ana Pessoa to the powerful internal administration portfolio – that she was a well-respected professional lawyer – did *de facto* privilege not only the older generation but the also returning exiles, in the same manner as the meritocratic basis of the Return of Qualified Exiles programme in Afghanistan did. Timorese had not been allowed to hold senior public service or professional positions under the Indonesians.

Furthermore, de Mello's comment implies that 'merit' is to be judged entirely in terms of Western ideas of 'professionalism' and not at all in terms of local knowledge. The distinction between Western and local knowledges became tied to the question of language in the Timorese case: the older elite returning from exile communicated mainly in Portuguese, a language that few people had ever been able to speak in East Timor. The younger generation who had lived through the war had been educated in Indonesian, and the expansion of education in East Timor during the occupation meant that this language was quite widely spoken by the time independence was restored. The return to the use of Portuguese in government and the legal system was seen as excluding the new middle class in favour of the small elite that had emerged under colonialism.

The discounting of local knowledge in this way was reflected also by the attitude of UNTAET to local chiefs throughout Timor in the early days following the withdrawal of the Indonesians: local authority structures set up in the village by the Clandestine Movement in the aftermath of the Indonesian withdrawal were largely ignored by UNTAET, which instead promoted a highly centralised approach to governance that focused upon formalising the position of a Western-influenced elite.

Ultimately, however, the lack of local knowledge paralysed the first post-independence government in Timor. East Timor had changed radically during the war years, to the extent that the clandestine movement and the External Delegation

⁴⁴ SRSRG Sergio Vieira de Mello's press briefing on Sat 15 July 2000 at the swearing-in of East Timor's Transitional Cabinet, available at: {<http://www.etan.org/et2000c/july/16-22/15srsrg.htm>}.

differed not only in their experiences and their ideologies, but in the language they spoke, their attitude to religion, the political networks they participated in, and the fundamental tenets of the identity they proclaimed to be Timorese. Thus one interviewee in Dili in 2005 commented:

Our Prime Minister was living in Mozambique during the war, then he came back here, but he doesn't really know the situation here. The Church, youth organisations, veterans – there are a lot of activities that he doesn't understand.⁴⁵

The External Delegation emerged from the tiny Portuguese-speaking, mestizo elite that existed in Dili in 1974; they held professional positions in countries such as Australia, Portugal and Mozambique during the war. The student wing of the Clandestine Movement that had emerged in Dili, by contrast, represented a broader, Bahasa-speaking generation schooled in Catholicism and Indonesian nationalism, as well as in law. While neither their Indonesian education nor their Catholic beliefs can properly be termed 'indigenous', they came to represent a form of local knowledge that was being marginalised, belittled and challenged by the return of the Fretilin diaspora, and their apparently privileged treatment by the UN Secretary General. The significance of this was pointed out by the president of the Timorese Bar Association in an interview in 2005:

Most Timorese educated people were educated in the Indonesian time – almost 100 per cent. From the Portuguese time you can count on your fingers the number of people educated. Not more than 200 went through university. But mostly we were educated by the Indonesians. From our generation, we fought against Indonesia, but we were educated by the Indonesians. We had our eyes opened because they sent us to school. That's how we won independence.⁴⁶

For this interviewee, Indonesian education is the key to victory in the independence struggle, and therefore deserving of respect as an indigenous knowledge, something that the returnees denied. The respective 'capacities' of the Portuguese-educated elite and the Indonesian-educated strata became a significant bone of contention in the post-independence period. The Prime Minister made the infamous comment in a public speech that holders of Indonesian qualifications were 'sarjana supermi [instant noodles]' degree holders – holders of degrees that were cheap, poor quality and quickly cooked up. Graduates of Indonesian universities, in consequence, were quick to see political intrigue behind every attempt at training that was offered to them, and the decision to send all judges and prosecutors, on reduced salaries, back to college, was viewed in this light: 'Since independence, we have been marginalised. They say we are not qualified because we graduated from Indonesia.'⁴⁷ The fact that international training for lawyers in the post-independence period was delivered in Portuguese, a language the judges and prosecutors did not speak, was a particular irritant, and the ban on the use of Indonesian, the language in which the judges and prosecutors had received their legal training, in written exams was regarded by the judges and prosecutors themselves as the key reason why they had failed the evaluation.

⁴⁵ Lawyer (name withheld for reasons of confidentiality), interview with the author, Dili (28 May 2005).

⁴⁶ Mr Benevides Barros, president, Bar Association of Timor-Leste, interview with the author, Dili (15 April 2005).

⁴⁷ Lawyer (name withheld for reasons of confidentiality), interview with the author, Dili (27 May 2005).

One lawyer summed up the prevailing mood among judges and lawyers in the midst of these events, when he argued that the elite returnees from the diaspora sought to re-establish hierarchies of power and status linked to Portuguese colonialism, as a means of consolidating their own power and fending off challenges from a newly educated middle class. He commented that the employment of Portuguese-speaking judges from abroad to replace Timorese was a means of re-establishing a politics of contempt for Timorese backwardness, which had been marked since the Portuguese colonial practice of dividing the population into civilised and uncivilised: 'Portuguese ideology says their colonies are idiots and stupid – no one is considered smart. So we are also considered stupid.'⁴⁸

A major problem for post-independence East Timor was that the centrality of 'capacity' to ideas of legitimacy in a country in which various elite groups, with a powerful sense of their own contribution to the historic struggle, but with fairly shallow links to any really existing domestic constituency, jostled for power. The emphasis on 'capacity' as a prerequisite for political participation by UNTAET promoted this tendency. As a result, *claims as to what kinds of 'capacity' might be needed or desired were highly politically motivated, and often developed without reference at all to perceptions of needs on the ground.* This produced a post-conflict government that was elite-based, obsessed with the refinement of hierarchies of status and power, and concerned above all to demobilise and subordinate a population that regarded itself as a 'nation of heroes'. The result was catastrophic for institutionalisation in East Timor in the early years following independence.

In Cambodia, the highly politicised and clientelist state long proved frustratingly impervious to capacity-building efforts, prompting increasing amounts of money to be thrown at the issue until, according to a 2007 aid effectiveness review, the proportion of aid spent on technical assistance, as opposed to investment, reached almost 50 per cent. This compared to an average of 20 per cent among other least developed countries in the region, and, unlike other countries in the region, appeared to be increasing rather than declining.⁴⁹ The question of the actual capacity of Cambodia's state institutions are addressed in the concluding section of this article: but the persistence of high levels of technical cooperation assistance to Cambodia reflect the perception among donors that governance in Cambodia is poor and that therefore more capacity-building is needed.

In the arena of 'civil society', international organisations found a willing cohort of would-be trainees ready to both have their own capacities built and in turn build the capacities of others. Civil associations had not existed independent of the state in pre-UNTAC Cambodia, and one of UNTAC's 'peacebuilding' tasks was to promote a civil society that could, in particular, help UNTAC with the job of promoting human rights in Cambodia. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's implementation plan for UNTAC interpreted UNTAC's human rights role as including a mandate to 'encourage the establishment of indigenous human rights associations' and involve them in the business of investigating and monitoring

⁴⁸ Lawyer (name withheld for reasons of confidentiality), interview with the author, Dili (16 June 2005).

⁴⁹ Cambodian Rehabilitation and Development Board of the Cambodian Development Council. *Cambodia Aid Effectiveness Report 2007* (Phnom Penh: Royal Government of Cambodia, 2007), p. 22.

human rights abuses.⁵⁰ Under the auspices of UNTAC and subsequent international donors, around 3000 NGOs have appeared in Cambodia over the last twenty years.

However, a succession of analyses of Cambodia's civil society have been disparaging regarding the ability of these organisations to represent or empower the poor. The intensive capacity-building resources received by these organisations have to a great extent become their *raison d'être*. Cambodian NGOs spend an inordinate amount of time building their own capacities – in areas such as book-keeping, English, computer skills and organisational development – and a rather small amount of time actually engaging in political activities on behalf of the poor.

It is interesting to note also that many of these organisations were set up and continue to be run by returnees from the Cambodian diaspora, who had lived outside Cambodia during the years of warfare and upheaval and returned in the 1990s to make a contribution to their homeland, having been successful in business or professional life elsewhere. While some of these organisations were and remain committed to promoting the quality of life for Cambodians, many more emerged on the basis of rationales comprising a jumble of pop-development buzzwords. On this basis, they recruited other members of the diaspora or new graduates in Phnom Penh to work for them; and embarked on programmes of 'organisational strengthening' and 'professional development' which were both funded by international donors and oriented towards the gaining of further international funds. 'Civil society' in Cambodia provided an educated class of urban professionals who lacked a role in the post-war political compact an opportunity to claim a contribution for themselves that was almost entirely based upon preferential access to Western knowledges such as 'human rights' and 'effective service-delivery'.

That this occurred is not a testament to the lengths to which Cambodians will go to exploit foreign aid donors. Rather, it suggests the exclusionary nature of the 'capacity-building' discourse as it is transposed into local political language. To 'have capacity' is to have access to another world of wealth and resources, on the grounds of one's 'professionalism'; to 'lack capacity' is to be distrusted and marginalised from any legitimate contribution. For Timorese lawyers and judges, with a formal role in the state system, the question was whether they would be forced to undergo a humiliating re-evaluation of their status. For Cambodian returnees entering civil society, with few alternatives given the highly politicised nature of the state apparatus and the lack of private sector opportunities, subordination to the demands of Western capacity was the price for return at all. The level of threat and uncertainty surrounding NGO work in the early 1990s entailed that these returnees were glad of external support and protection; and since familiarity with the language of 'capacity' quickly became the central metric by which hierarchies were established and resources doled out, it is unsurprising that 'capacity' became a highly prized and aggressively pursued commodity for its own sake: a means of signalling one's status rather than simply the competency with which one does one's job.

Ultimately, for international donors, the outcome has been frustration and withdrawal. On the one hand, donors cannot dispense with the rhetoric of

⁵⁰ Boutros Boutros-Ghali, 'Report of the Secretary-General on Cambodia Containing his Proposed Implementation Plan for UNTAC including Administrative and Financial Aspects', UN Document 2/23613, 19 February 1992, §9.

capacity-building since only this can ensure that their funds are spent effectively on projects that international donors regard as appropriate. Thus, the workshops in programme planning, log frame construction and transnational networking continue to take up large chunks of professional NGO workers' time. On the other hand, donors periodically release frustrated reports showing how Cambodian NGOs fail to engage with their target beneficiaries, fail to develop internally democratic structures, and fail to act as a conduit for concerns rising up from the grassroots. Within the Cambodian NGO sector, the embrace of Western professionalism, by returnees or the urban educated classes, has far outstripped the acquisition of local knowledge. One analyst described Cambodian civil society in 2004 as 'civil society without citizens'.⁵¹

Similarly, an evaluation of 'civil society' in Cambodia by the World Bank and the Centre for Advanced Study in Phnom Penh argued NGOs' 'disconnect from the masses and inability to demonstrate popular support undermines NGOs' credibility and influence and has caused government officials to question their legitimacy and representativity'. Donor orientation, the report concluded, encouraged a clustering of NGOs around Phnom Penh rather than in rural areas. *The report argued, 'NGOs currently have strong incentives to cater to donors' programmatic priorities and reporting requirements and weak incentives to respond and account to grassroots constituencies.'* Furthermore, the authors contended, 'NGOs' dependence on external donor funds also makes their financial sustainability uncertain and creates challenges in terms of reconciling foreign concepts and agendas with local (cultural, political and social) realities.'⁵²

For returnees in Cambodia's civil society sector, the outcome of their efforts was a movement that had remained closely aligned with Western knowledges but whose transformative impact on the local context was limited. Civil society leaders retained closer links with Western backers than with local beneficiaries; the organisations they established were to a great extent a refuge for educated young people who either could not or would not join the capacious state apparatus. As such, while NGOs achieved significant improvements in their own 'capacities', through regular attendance at trainings both in Cambodia and abroad, they had little success in contributing to anyone else's, either in the progressive manner envisaged by Eade, or in the ideological mode envisaged by the World Bank commissioners of the 2008 assessment, and critiqued by Hameiri.

Contesting Western knowledge with a politics of authenticity

In both cases, these ideas of 'capacity' were highly contested. In both Cambodia and East Timor, the claim that access to Western forms of professional knowledge should award a privileged role in reconstruction was hotly disputed by contending elites. In Cambodia, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which has ruled the country largely undisturbed since 1979 when its leaders overthrew the Khmer Rouge

⁵¹ Kheang Un, *Democratization without Consolidation: The Case of Cambodia, 1993–2004*, PhD thesis, Northern Illinois University (2004), p. 272.

⁵² World Bank and Centre for Advanced Study, *Linking Citizens and the State: an Assessment of Civil Society Contributions to Good Governance in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: World Bank, 2008), p. 2.

(with the significant backing of the Vietnamese army), has been highly successful in this. Initially the CPP focused its attention on the ranks of aspiring politicians who returned from the diaspora in the 1990s, both as part of the initially successful royalist movement and in the context of a variety of small parties. The CPP robustly contested the claims of returnees that they could bring in not only Western knowledge but also Western aid, investment and, ultimately, Western lifestyles. It did so by appropriating an assertive discourse of authenticity that emphasised the CPP's liberation of Cambodia from the Pol Pot regime and which ridiculed the dual citizenship and propensity to run away of opposition politicians holding second passports. CPP leader Hun Sen explicitly challenged the 'Khmerness' of the returnees in this context, memorably declaiming in one major speech,

If we want to take responsibility for the nation's fate, we must be responsible before the people [...] We must dare to take responsibility, to live and die with the people. Don't say you are Khmer when it is easy and American when it is difficult.⁵³

Similarly, NGOs have been depicted in cartoons in pro-government newspapers in the most derogatory terms, as a pack of dogs snapping for money thrown to them by American donors. In 2008, the government announced that it is drafting an NGO Law that will not only regulate Cambodian NGO activities but will force NGOs to reveal their funding relationships with donors. This attack from the standpoint of 'authenticity' is designed, like contending claims about 'capacity', to divide, privilege and exclude, rather than articulating any objective reality or inherent legitimacy on the part of the claimant.

More significantly, the Cambodian People's Party has launched its own political campaign which roots its claim to legitimacy in its ability to 'get things done' without the overt backing or training of international donors. The ability of the CPP to pass off many foreign-donated infrastructure projects as its own; and its further capacity to mobilise vast funds of money for providing development projects such as schools and temples, has been a vote-winner, and has allowed the party to claim effectiveness on the basis of supposedly authentic Khmer values such as gift exchange and solidarity. This has proved highly popular with the voters in successive elections, particularly during the economic boom from 2001 to 2008, in part because the CPP, with its impressive network of party cadres at district and commune level in every part of Cambodia, indeed has more capacity to get things done than donors, opposition parties, or NGOs. A recent analysis of the CPP's handling of funds for party financed development activities has shown that a system which combines rigorous codes of obligation and clear lines of accountability with indigenous values of loyalty, exchange, 'face' and status operates highly effectively in a state that, when handling donor's money, is regarded as one of the most corrupt in the world.⁵⁴

In Timor-Leste, lawyers were unable to successfully defend their Indonesian law degrees, but another contender, the Catholic Church, successfully combated the agenda of the Fretilin government on grounds of authenticity. The Church

⁵³ Extract from a speech made by Hun Sen at a medical training school, Phnom Penh (27 April 1996), quoted in 'Hun Sen: Live and Die with the People', *Phnom Penh Post* (3–16 May 1996), p. 3.

⁵⁴ David Craig and Pak Kimchoeun, 'Party Financing of Local Investment Projects: Elite and Mass Patronage', in Caroline Hughes and Kheang Un, *Cambodia's Economic Transformation*, as yet unpublished manuscript (2009), pp. 244–71.

organised a series of large public demonstrations against Fretilin's secular education policy in early 2005, which significantly drained the legitimacy of the Alkatiri government. Fretilin had mooted the idea that in the new state school educational curriculum, religious education should be made optional in line with the commitment to secular education in the Constitution. This was anathema to the Church, which demanded a central role for catechism in public schools.

The dispute demonstrated the shifting status of the Church over the period of the Indonesian Occupation. While in 1974, the Church was the province of the colonial elite, with only 20 per cent of the Timorese population was characterised as Catholic, the Indonesian policy of registering everyone with a major world religion entailed that the proportion of the population defining themselves as Catholic rose to 90 per cent. At the same time, under Indonesian rule, the Timorese Church continued to be administered from the Vatican separately from the Indonesian Catholic Church, and permission was given for services to be held in the local *lingua franca*, Tetum, rather than Portuguese. By these means, and by the role that Timorese priests played in the resistance struggle, the Church became indigenised, such that Fretilin's progressive secular policies, which would have been barely contested in the early 1970s, were an explosive issue in the 1990s, seen as demonstrating the lack of understanding, on the part of the Fretilin leaders, of how Timorese identity had evolved during the war.

The following year, violence erupted in Dili over tensions between soldiers from the western and eastern districts of Timor-Leste, with westerners claiming discrimination against them by the eastern commanders. Discontent with the slow pace of development, and claims that leaders were siphoning money to the east reawakened ancient regional divisions which had been largely dormant during the period of national liberation struggle. The Timorese case demonstrates the ways in which the nature of the 'authentic' and of divisions within society transform rapidly in situations of conflict and poverty; the resignation of Alkatiri from government in the face of this opposition indicates the highly politicised nature of struggles over local knowledge in the face of international capacity building efforts involving returnees.

Conclusion

This analysis of capacity assessment and capacity-building is significant, because of the broader significance of claims of authenticity and cosmopolitanism to politics in post-conflict countries, and the ways in which these affect the ability of elites to foster links with the population that can shore up newly established institutions. In states facing a large influx of international aid, facility in Western knowledges represents a significant political resource, as well as a potentially important resource for finding practical solutions to problems. Yet it is also exclusionary and to that extent it is contested by equally divisive and interested counter-claims of 'authenticity' that can be used to challenge or deny casual assumptions of ethnic fraternity. The problem with capacity building is not that language difficulties or cultural sensitivities preclude foreigners from effectively transferring technical knowledge to locals; but that the prioritisation of international knowledge over

local knowledge has not been adequately acknowledged to be a highly political process, which requires the application of particular types of power and the mobilisation of particular types of alliance if it is to succeed. Indeed, investment in cosmopolitanism can come at the expense of investment in political links at home, and it is these links of solidarity, loyalty and obligation that ultimately award political power, as the Cambodian People's Party has so effectively shown in Cambodia, and Fretilin demonstrated by its failure in Timor-Leste. These links are not awarded merely by asserting a common ethnic identity. Rather they emerge from participation over time in political activities that are, at least to some extent, informed by an account of human need that accords with lived experience on the ground. This is an area in which local knowledge clearly has the edge, in that it tends to come with local networks and alliances that can be used to mobilise popular support. Harnessing this kind of local knowledge to development agendas represents the key task for development agencies seeking to effect change in post-conflict states.